

Leading Australian journalist advocates confrontation with China

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Peter Hartcher, the international editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* and a frequent guest on television current affairs programs, wrote a column on May 5 that called for the US and its allies, including Australia, to confront China over Beijing's construction of alleged military infrastructure on disputed territories in the South China Sea.

Hartcher's piece was headlined: "World reluctant to point finger at China's encroachment on strategic islands." Standing reality on its head, he depicted the Asia-Pacific as a region where an aggressive China has brushed aside the concerns and protests of neighbouring states and the United States. Beijing, he declared, is pursuing an agenda of "relentless expansionism, yet no one is prepared to stand in its way."

Hartcher condemned regional governments, and the Obama administration, for supposedly refusing to oppose China. The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) had "showed it was weak, divided and unwilling to confront China" and "won't even talk about the problem openly, much less act." Australia, he asserted, "has dealt with it the same way almost all countries have—by pretending that it's not really happening... Governments do not want to put trade relations at risk by confronting Beijing over its bad behaviour in taking territory from weaker states."

Hartcher echoed the stance outlined in a major report published last month by the US Council for Foreign Relations (CFR). The report advocated a "new grand strategy," consisting of an intensified economic, diplomatic and military drive to undermine and weaken China. It asserted that China is the "most significant competitor" of the US and called for "less emphasis on support and cooperation and more on pressure and competition" (see: "US 'Grand Strategy' for war

against China laid out").

After citing Bob Blackwill, one of the authors of the CFR document, Hartcher concluded his column as follows: "The question is no longer whether China will forcibly take territory claimed by other nations. The question is what the rest of the world is going to do about it."

Both the CFR report and Hartcher's comment, in denouncing Chinese aggression, excluded any reference to the context in which the Chinese regime has ordered the construction of airfields and other infrastructure on tiny reefs and islands in the South China Sea. Neither mentioned the US "pivot" to Asia, which has involved continuous diplomatic and military provocations directed against China since Obama formally announced the policy on the floor of the Australian parliament in November 2011.

With the openly stated aim of concentrating 60 percent of American air and naval power in the Indo-Pacific by 2020, Washington is expanding its military deployments across the region. New basing arrangements have gone into effect in Australia, Singapore and the Philippines, including at sites directly adjacent to the disputed territories. The US has expanded its military ties and exchanges with India and Vietnam, and most provocatively, with Japan. The Obama administration has provided a blank cheque to the right-wing nationalist Japanese government of Shinzo Abe, pledging full US military support to maintain Japan's hold over the East China Sea's Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, which are claimed by China.

The US, Australian and Japanese armed forces are being systematically integrated and trained, through regular military exercises, to implement the Pentagon's AirSea Battle concept, which envisages devastating attacks on targets in mainland China, cyber and outer-

space attacks on satellites and communications systems, and a naval economic blockade.

In July, as many as 30,000 American and Australian personnel, deployed with dozens of warships and hundreds of aircraft in the Pacific Ocean and across northern Australia, will conduct Exercise Talisman Sabre. The training is literally a dress rehearsal for blockading the Straits of Malacca and Indonesia's Sunda and Lombok Straits, and shutting down the maritime trade routes through which China receives energy supplies and raw materials.

It is in this climate of growing threat that the Chinese regime is seeking to establish facilities in the South China Sea. Its military would seek to utilise the tiny outposts to protect the approaches to the sea lanes, and negate the overwhelming superiority of the US and its allies.

The CFR report and Hartcher's comment reflect the manner in which Beijing's attempts to match imperialist militarism with militarism of its own are being seized upon in the US and Australia to demand even greater aggression.

Hartcher has a carefully cultivated persona within the Australian media establishment, as the detached and passionless commentator, someone who stands apart from the rhetoric of the "left" and the "right." His commentary on China, however, has marked him out as one of the most bellicose advocates of military confrontation.

On March 4, Hartcher authored a column for the *Sydney Morning Herald* bluntly headlined: "IS [Islamic State], Russia, China: all fascist states." He justified this amalgam by reducing the historical phenomenon of fascism to an authoritarian, centralised, nationalistic state, powered by a "sense of historical grievance or victimhood." China, he opined, "is overcoming its 'century of humiliation' at the hands of Western imperialism."

"In short," Hartcher declared, "there is no need for Western leaders to play word games... All three of these rising threats are enemies of freedom. They deny freedom to their own people and they ride roughshod over the rights of other peoples."

He concluded: "The world confronts a resurgent fascism. It doesn't seem that the West, absorbed with economic crisis in Europe and political dysfunction in the US, comprehends fully the force and the fury rising

against it."

In the period ahead, Hartcher's assertion that China is an expansionist fascist power, seeking to destroy the "West," may well emerge as the political pretext for the steadily growing preparations for war by the US and its allies.



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